No Such Thing as Society: The Novel under Neoliberalism

Eileen Pollard and Berthold Schoene

Because literature always depends on evoking a sense of community between writers and their readers, there can be no flourishing of literature without society. Indicative of this axiomatic is the novel's contribution to how any specific 'social imaginary' or 'structure of feeling' comes to crystallize in the first place. Complementing Raymond Williams' influential encapsulation of 'structure of feeling' as each new generation's response to 'the unique world it is inheriting, taking up many continuities [...] yet feeling its whole life in certain ways differently',[1] Manfred Steger defines social imaginaries as the ways in which '"we" – the members of a particular community – fit together, how things go on between us, the expectations we have of each other, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie those expectations'.[2] The final two decades of the twentieth century are no exception in this regard, as they too constitute a singular slice of history with its own particular set of common understandings, expressions and practices of culture and community. Importantly, the perceived distinctiveness and newness of the period was the result not so much of a gentle generational shift as a wholescale political revolution, the enormity of which would jolt society into a hitherto inconceivable direction of socio-economic change and cultural transmutation. As Colin Hutchinson puts it, the inception of Thatcherite neoliberalism in Britain is best understood as a violent 'assault […] on the public realm [leading to] the

[1] Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965 [1961]), p. 65.
[2] Manfred Steger, 'Globalisation and Social Imaginaries: The Changing Ideological Landscape of the Twenty First Century', *Journal of Critical Globalisation Studies* 1 (2009), 12, accessed February 19, 2016, http://criticalglobalisation.com/Issue1/9_30_JCGS1_STEGER_GLOBALIMAGINARIES.pdf.

erosion of civic sensibilities and collective allegiances'.[3] Another point of interest for us is the formative implication of 'The Individual' in the symbiosis of society and the novel. Nancy Armstrong describes individualism as 'the ideological core' of the novel; in her view, 'novels think like individuals about the difficulties of fulfilling oneself […] under specific cultural historical conditions'.[4] Armstrong's proposition assumes special significance in the light of Margaret Thatcher's announcement in 1987 that 'there is no such thing [as society]! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first.'[5] Thatcher's eradication of society and her hyperbolic championing of the individual instigated a fundamental ideological recasting of late twentieth-century Britain's social imaginary, which in turn significantly influenced the development of the British novel.

David Harvey describes neoliberalism as *the* hegemonic discourse of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In his view neoliberalism 'has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world', affecting all things cultural and communal from social relations and 'divisions of labour' to reproductive activities and 'habits of the heart'.[6] Under neoliberalism, people conceive of themselves, as Wendy Brown has put it for the American context, as 'entrepreneurs and consumers whose moral autonomy is measured by […] their ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions'.[7] Similarly, Nicholas Kiersey identifies the neoliberal individual as 'a dynamic "entrepreneur of himself," constantly balancing costs and benefits, and constantly

[3] Colin Hutchinson, *Reaganism, Thatcherism and the Social Novel* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), p. 1.
[4] Nancy Armstrong, *How Novels Think: The Limits of Individualism from 1719-1900* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 10.
[5] Margaret Thatcher, 'AIDS, Education and the Year 2000!', *Woman's Own*, October, 31 1987), http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689.
[6] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 3.
[7] Wendy Brown, 'American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization', *Political Theory* 34 (2006), 694.

careful of the future impact of choices even in seemingly non-economic spheres'.[8] What is shifting, then, in late twentieth-century Britain are popular perceptions of the value of community, as well as the motivation, impetus and sense of purpose that make for a fruitful, fulfilled life. Self-fulfilment previously achieved by finding one's place within society, however haphazardly, is superseded by recurrent attempts at improved self-actualization, strategically exploiting society's resources to promote the individual's striving for success, quite as if the individual life was in itself a project in pressing need of completion. What this new subjectivity reveals is of course that, in contradiction of its promise, neoliberalism never actually *delivers* a condition of freedom and happiness to the individual; rather, individualism itself becomes a means of subjection and control. The increasingly urgent quest for self-perfection grows into the very mechanism by which the neoliberal self's confinement in conformity is secured. Against this background, we are asking what happened to the novel's traditional endorsement of plot trajectories of social integration at a time when people were assumed to define their priorities only according to calculations of personal gain and benefit. Another question is whether the novel under neoliberalism altered its treatment of the couple as society's most elemental articulation of community and, by extension, the family as society's core portal between the individual and the world at large. Put differently, does neoliberalism as the period's new 'structure of feeling' succeed in hijacking the novel for its own ideological ends, or how precisely does the novel sustain its traditional balancing act of meeting communal expectations of conformity, while at the same time enabling manoeuvres of self-assertive defiance and dissent?

Martin Amis' *Money: A Suicide Note* (1984) and Julie Burchill's *Ambition* (1989) are two novels propelled by individual freedom as a wholly *compulsive* exercise of the self.

[8] Nicholas Kiersey, 'Everyday Neoliberalism and the Subjectivity of Crisis: Post-Political Control in an Era of Financial Turmoil', *Journal of Critical Globalisation Studies* 4 (2011), 35.

Increasingly corrupted by money, both John Self, Amis' hero, and Susan Street, Burchill's heroine, succumb to the neoliberal dynamic of creative destruction, but whereas *Money* follows the trajectory of a postmodern tragedy, *Ambition* – a bodice-ripping *Bridget Jones's Diary* of the 1980s – quite literally refuses to end by 'thinking in a ceaseless stream of clichés – white wedding, happy ending'[9] as Susan's story moves full-circle from inadvertently killing one boss to inadvertently killing another. Neither novel offers much in terms of traditional self-development. *Money* appears forever only one small step removed from breakdown and failure ('I really am cracking up, I really am deteriorating', we hear John mutter to himself),[10] while *Ambition* is caught up in a seemingly pointless picaresque loop transporting the heroine repeatedly down a snake to square one. Burchill's novel begins and ends with the same farcical *liebestod* scenario, showing Susan rise triumphant from the crumpled bedsheets bursting with pseudo-feminist self-assertion: 'My name is Susan Street, and I am the youngest-ever female newspaper editor in the world. The man on the bed jerked one more time, as if in agreement'.[11] Meanwhile John Self, who has done well for himself with a career in advertising, is introduced to us as 'addicted to the twentieth century'.[12] A perfect allegorical encapsulation of the traditional subject in crisis, name and all, John is an overweight, paranoid drunk with an unhealthy pornographic imagination and lifestyle, and a tendency to live above his means. His life does not have much direction beyond immediate self-gratification. Traditional narration as such is in jeopardy as John 'can't handle anything continuous anymore'.[13] In the end, not only is the plot of the novel revealed to conspire against him, as the shooting of John's first feature film is discovered to be a fraudulent hoax, but his whole identity unravels when his father, who has invoiced John for every penny spent on his education, turns out to be not his real biological parent at all.

[9] Julie Burchill, *Ambition* (London: The Bodley Head, 1989), p. 244.
[10] Martin Amis, *Money* (London: Penguin, 1985 [1984]), p. 174.
[11] Burchill, *Ambition*, pp. 3, 255.
[12] Amis, *Money*, p. 91.
[13] Amis, *Money*, p. 155.

From the outset *Money* militates against the traditional self as a secure value and solid reference point, dramatizing not just the fragility and fractiousness of selfhood, but steeping the whole text in a sense of chronic exhaustion that comes from asserting too much autonomy and self-constancy. As *Money* opens, the self is shown to be already ailing and in pain. 'I really didn't need that,' Self tells us by way of an introduction, 'with my head and face and back and heart hurting a lot all the time anyway, and still drunk and crazed and ghosted from the plane'.[14] Like its chief protagonist, the novel itself is at risk of unravelling with the sheer effort of incorporating a life. By contrast, *Ambition* presents itself as almost insufferably alive-and-kicking due to its heroine's steely determination and hunger for upward mobility. Initially, as we are informed that Susan is to be taught a lesson, we are still inclined to believe in the novel's promise of self-development after the model of traditional *Bildung*. However, 'the six labours of Susan',[15] assigned by her new boss, only serve to demonstrate the novel's irrevocable entrapment in the era's new *savoir-vivre*, pictured by Burchill as a sado-masochistic relationship between master and apprentice, and succinctly defined by Jodi Dean in her essay 'Enjoying Neoliberalism' as 'a philosophy viewing market exchange as a guide for all human action'.[16] The ultimate aim is not to trace Susan's emancipatory edification, but to show how Susan's self-worth is determined by supply and demand. 'You do what I want, and you get what you want … Or you break',[17] her boss instructs her. Notably the price she has to pay is her integrity as a 'free' human being: her first 'labour' is to have the word 'SOLD' tattooed on her forehead in small red capitals.

[14] Amis, *Money*, p. 1.
[15] Burchill, *Ambition*, p. 27.
[16] Jodi Dean, 'Enjoying Neoliberalism', *Cultural Politics* 4 (2008), 48.
[17] Burchill, *Ambition*, p. 28.

It is the operations of money that cause John's pain and Susan's ancillary automation. In John's view, money is the opposite of 'thought and fascination';[18] its impact on the human is wholly disempowering as it assumes its own mysterious agency. 'I have money but I can't control it,' John remarks. 'Money, I think, is uncontrollable. Even those of us who have it, we can't control it'.[19] Ultimately the effect of money on the individual is self-destructive and deadly: 'Dollar bills, pound notes, they're suicide notes'.[20] In other words, the more money you have, the worse your situation, and the more you state your intention that you wish to die. John's experience of money is strongly reminiscent of Susan's sado-masochistic relationship with her boss: 'I subserve the detailed money action, do this, do that, run money errands. I am pussy-whipped by money,' John explains. 'We are all stomped and roughed up and peed on and slammed against the wall by money'.[21] John seems inclined to yield to his new position of powerlessness, thus rendering *Money* also a swansong of traditional masculinity: 'Men are often urged, by women, to recognize the feminine side of their nature. I always thought that was faghag talk but now I'm not so sure. Maybe that is what's happening to me – I'm getting chicked. It would explain a great deal'.[22] Unsurprisingly perhaps, *Ambition* sees Susan turn precisely the opposite way: as she declares with aplomb, she is not someone to 'suffer from female trouble'.[23] 'Her impenetrability'[24] only heightens her post-feminist allure. She seems able to incorporate the entire gender spectrum at once, making her a 'ruthless, competitive and individualistic' paragon of 'free-market feminism in the Eighties'[25] who perplexes her boss by turning subordination into a means of pleasurable self-assertion:

[18] Amis, *Money*, p. 123.
[19] Amis, *Money*, p. 154.
[20] Amis, *Money*, p. 116.
[21] Amis, *Money*, p. 271.
[22] Amis, *Money*, p. 331.
[23] Burchill, *Ambition*, p. 84.
[24] Burchill, *Ambition*, p. 218.
[25] Burchill, *Ambition*, p. 93.

> Susan was hard. Beneath the satin abundance of skin and hair, it was like biting on silver foil; you couldn't get through. He put her into situations which would have curdled the blood of any normal white woman and she didn't just endure them to please him, as the others did; she *took* the situation away from him and turned it towards her own pleasure.[26]

As confirmed by its subtitle, *Money* is suicidal in both tone and disposition as it gives in to the suffering inflicted on the self by the new 'spirit of the age.' Meanwhile, *Ambition* does its tenacious best to carve out a living from turning compliance into self-assertion, pain into pleasure, and suffering into homicidal agency. *Ambition* displays an unnerving affinity with Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), doubtless the neoliberal novel's most eminent exemplar yet, due to its relentless pursuit of society's collapse and the vanishing of all common humanity. Like Easton Ellis, Burchill conspicuously references designer labels throughout. However, Burchill's most ingenious coup is not to have to resort to an imagery of physical violence at all to convey her message about the waning of society; she even abandons the cliché of woman as *femme fatale*. It is society itself that is the killer. What proves so toxic is the very assertion that there *is* such a thing as society, and that each individual must contribute to it. In the end, Susan's boss is killed not by her libidinal prowess but by his own morbid dread of taxation, which was 'his demon. Compulsory communism, he called it; the malignant tumour in the tender flesh of freedom'.[27]

The titles of James Kelman's *A Disaffection* (1989) and Janice Galloway's *The Trick Is to Keep Breathing* (1989) already identify these two Scottish texts as markedly different from their London counterparts. Rather than driven by extrovert self-expenditure, the Scottish

[26] Burchill, *Ambition*, p. 219.
[27] Burchill, *Ambition*, p. 247.

novels gravitate around internalized failure, trauma and depression. Whereas *Money* and *Ambition* unleash their private-sector protagonists in a frenzy of self-promoting activity, Kelman's and Galloway's novels are weighed down by the cynicism and pent-up fury of their public-sector hero and heroine, respectively, neither of whom is yet entirely resigned to their role as mere functionary of the state. John Self and Susan Street are opportunistic cosmopolitan entrepreneurs in the media and creative industries, while Patrick Doyle and Joy Stone are disenchanted teachers stuck in the claustrophobic subnational parochialism of 1980s Glasgow. According to Patrick, 'there's something very very fishy about being a teacher';[28] in his view, a teacher is 'a fellow who receives a greater than average wage for the business of fencing in the children of the suppressed poor'.[29] There is no way out either: Patrick's one spontaneous attempt to break free (to England) founders due to a lack of resolve. 'He dropped the gear from top to third to second, slowing at the roundabout up from the Motherwell sliproad, returning back onto the M74, heading home to Glasgow'.[30] Unlike John and Susan who escalate their own corruption, Patrick and Joy are deeply pained not so much by the inconsequentiality of their public service as its *complicity*, which has robbed them of their optimism and self-belief, left them estranged from their working-class roots, and tainted their integrity, personal as well as professional. Whereas Susan agrees to have SOLD tattooed onto her forehead, Patrick does not take his perceived mercenariness at all lightly. He is deeply hurt by his brother's view of him as 'a middle-class wanker',[31] not because he thinks it is an unforgivable insult but because it strikes him as absolutely true. 'He was an article that was corrupt,' Patrick concedes. 'He was representative of corruption, representative of a corrupt and repressive society which operated nicely and efficiently as an effect of the liberal machinations of such as himself.' In Patrick's view, he cannot expect 'to

[28] James Kelman, *A Disaffection* (London: Vintage, 1999 [1989]), p. 14.
[29] Kelman, *A Disaffection*, p. 67.
[30] Kelman, *A Disaffection*, p. 73.
[31] Kelman, *A Disaffection*, p. 285.

be treated differently to any member of the fucking government or polis or the fucking law courts.' As he concludes, he 'had sold his rights'.[32] Significantly, this selling of rights smacks not of artifice or hyperbole as Susan's tattoo does. Rather, it signifies a hidden, secretive and therefore much more insidious and real betrayal.

A Disaffection is also a contemplation of suicide, yet this never grows into anything resembling Amis' allegorical spectacle of the neoliberal condition. Kelman's novel retains the flavour of the ordinary, the local, the vernacular and intimately autobiographical – in other words, of lived experience as opposed to the exquisitely-drawn conceptual abstraction of Amis' grand postmodern vision. Yet despite its engagement of the minutiae of an individual life, *A Disaffection* apprehends individualism also as a serious impediment to seeing the whole picture. Telling Alison, his colleague and illicit object of desire, about his youthful attempts to prepare some of his undergraduate coursework for publication, Patrick explains that 'the I's were the worst. Everywhere you looked always this fucking I. I I I. I got really fucking sick of it I mean it was depressing, horrible. I mean that's exactly what you're trying to get rid of in the first damn bloody fucking place'.[33] Ironically, it is his aspiration to look at things from a broader, less individually-coloured and compromised perspective that causes Patrick's atomization and estrangement from his surroundings as his impatience with his own shortcomings expresses itself in increasingly antisocial outbursts. He fails to win over even Alison who is quick to point out to him that 'it's about individuals […] It's about individual teachers and it's about individual children'.[34]

Scotland has always liked to portray itself as possessing greater communal fibre than its southern neighbour, presenting its fight for subnational emancipation also as a fight for

[32] Kelman, *A Disaffection*, p. 303.
[33] Kelman, *A Disaffection*, p. 145.
[34] Kelman, *A Disaffection*, p. 157.

greater social justice. In the absence of adequate political representation, Scottish literature has traditionally served as an instrument of national self-expression, never more so than during the final two decades of the twentieth century, that is, between Scotland's first failed home rule referendum of 1979 (which deepened the impact of Thatcher's election that year as Prime Minister) and the second successful referendum of 1997. At a time when Scotland found itself on the receiving end of Anglo-British policy-making rather than in a position of national self-governance, it is clear why it would have been impossible for anyone Scottish to write novels like *Money* or *Ambition*. The whole Scottish literary establishment was set on resisting rather than yielding to, or perhaps even celebrating, Thatcherite neoliberalization. Notably, in literature resistance often finds expression in formal experimentation, as epitomized by Kelman's pioneering use of Glaswegian as a language for novelistic representation. According to Aaron Kelly, Kelman subverts the high-modernist penchant for free indirect discourse (elegantly defined by Kelly as 'the ability of an author to withdraw from the style of his or her narrative and to allow a character's consciousness to colour the tone and shape of what is still ostensibly a third-person perspective') by turning it into *unfree direct discourse*, a far less harmonious or smoothly homogenizing synchronization of character and perspective, designed to snag any easy discursive flow or narrative attempt at dialogic integration by replacing it with something much more uncomfortable, recalcitrant and jarring. As Kelly explains, in Kelman's novel 'there is only the direct impacting of discourses that are unfree or bounded by their situatedness in hierarchical registers of language and a society stratified by inequality.' Bristling with class consciousness and impervious to authorial orchestration, 'there is no autonomous subjectivity in *A Disaffection*, or, more radically, any mediating discourse in the form of a superintending narrative form which consensually makes that subject agree its place in society'.[35] In other words, *A*

[35] Aaron Kelly, '"I Just Tell the Bloody Truth, As I See It": James Kelman's *A Disaffection*, the Enlightenment,

Disaffection resists the novel's generic urge to bring harmony where there is discord; instead it cultivates a stance of protest and intransigence that allows 'a disaffection' to be felt even at a formal level.

In its effort to provide an authentic expression of the lived experience of her protagonist, Galloway embarks upon even more radical experimentation. Joy's world could not be any further removed from Susan's. The grieving mistress of somebody else's accidentally drowned husband, Joy – despite her name – is portrayed as a depressive, anorexic, self-harming schoolteacher who seeks refuge in a psychiatric ward. She is irreparably broken, one might think, but the novel turns out to be primarily interested in her resilience and the survival strategies by which she keeps herself in one piece, however precariously. What saves Joy in the end is her quasi-pathological incorrigibility: her dissociative state ('I watch myself from the corner of the room'), her fragility ('there's a mirror in the bathroom that's best avoided'), her intransigence ('I am the problem') and her existential nausea ('I have lost the ease of being inside my own skin').[36] The novel expresses Joy's individualist snagging by means of erratic punctuation, sudden typographical unevenness and font changes, gaps, lists, barely-legible annotations in the margins of the text, and silences – the point-blank suspension of narrative, of language, of self-expression. 'Stillness helps me when I'm alone. It keeps me contained',[37] Joy remarks early on in the novel, revealing her self-withdrawal – her being bad, mad and sad – as the mechanism by which she preserves her integrity. In a world 'where good = productive/hardworking/wouldn't say boo] […] where good = value for money […] where good = neat, acting in a credit-worthy manner'[38] Joy is neither good nor saleable. The lives of both Patrick and Joy are shown to be suffering an impasse, mirroring

Romanticism and Melancholy Knowledge', *Etudes Ecossaises* 12 (2009), 79-99, accessed January 18, 2016, http://etudesecossaises.revues.org/193.

[36] Janice Galloway, *The Trick Is To Keep Breathing* (London: Minerva, 1991 [1989]), pp. 7, 8, 12, 166.

[37] Galloway, *The Trick Is To Keep Breathing*, p. 15.

[38] Galloway, *The Trick Is To Keep Breathing*, pp. 81-82.

Scotland's impasse as a nation between the two referendums. Both novels are indebted for their very existence to Kelman's and Galloway's against-all-the-odds resolve to repudiate the kind of 'crisis cultivation' which several decades later Lauren Berlant in *Cruel Optimism* (2011) would come to expose as the chief coping mechanism of the neoliberal subject, whose expert ability to plunge him or herself wholeheartedly into everyday life as *business*-as-usual tends widely to be mistaken for adjustment. Intent on working through and overcoming impasse (as the new modus operandi of neoliberalism), and on opening up possibilities of genuine transition that do not jeopardize the autonomy of the self, *A Disaffection* and *The Trick Is To Keep Breathing* assert the self's capacity to recharge and move on without ineluctably ceasing to be true to itself.

Cultivated as a mode of operating, or 'structure of feeling,' impasse cannot but undermine *Bildung* as the development of the youthful self-in-progress, the self-under-construction voyaging towards self-fulfilment and social integration. Stuck between adult examples of impulsive self-expenditure as suicidal or hollowed-out self-advancement, on the one hand, and the inertia of depression and infuriated cynicism, on the other, it is hard to develop a clear sense of what might count as the right balance between self-assertion and conformity. It is in this light that we want to examine young female agency in Rachel Cusk's debut *Saving Agnes* (1993). In *Future Girl* (2004) Anita Harris describes what she refers to as neoliberalism's iconization of young women as 'the most likely candidates for performing a new kind of self-made subjectivity'.[39] Under neoliberalism, Harris argues, young femininity emerges as the only mainstream identity not 'in crisis'; rather, girlhood becomes a paradigmatic example of neoliberalism's new currency of flexibility and 'fickleness' as productive modes of opportunistic self-actualization. Like the neoliberal discourse of

[39] Anita Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), p. 6.

freedom of choice, however, the new discourse of 'girl power' – popularized in the 1990s by the chart-topping Spice Girls – prescribes a coercive set of ideals, and failure to fulfil her potential invariably ends up being blamed on the individual girl herself.

Clearly semi-autobiographical, *Saving Agnes* charts the life of a young Oxford graduate who has moved to London to try herself out on the job market. Almost immediately we find her progress into adulthood impeded by the same postmodern onslaught on traditional notions of certainty that work to ruin the integrity of John Self in *Money*. Agnes' identity quickly reaches crisis point as she realizes that her life so far has been built on illusions, misconceptions and false expectations. She used to believe that life would eventually reveal its true significance to her by giving her 'some vital clue that would make everything clear',[40] yet such an apotheosis – 'when I would become myself, if you see what I mean, instead of just impersonating what I thought I should be'[41] – never comes. Instead she finds herself lumbered with a postmodern self necessitating ceaseless negotiation between a multiplicity of actual and possible realizations, or – to put it in Agnes' own words – 'the muddled, sprawling sum of her parts'.[42] Agnes is embarked upon a quest for a kind of solidity no longer available in the postmodern world. It does not help that her self-esteem is low from the outset, leading to what must be one of the most defeatist self-portraits in late twentieth-century literature: 'For she was none other than Agnes Day: sub-editor, suburbanite, *failure extraordinaire*'.[43] Agnes lacks the fervent self-assurance of Jeanette Winterson's protagonist in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), another (much better known) female *bildungsroman* of the era; nor can she emulate Susan Street's brazen ascent in *Ambition*. Instead, we find her pining for the kind of secure vocational or marital self-completion that only a good old-fashioned

[40] Rachel Cusk, *Saving Agnes* (London: Picador, 1994 [1993]), p. 200.
[41] Cusk, *Saving Agnes*, p. 188.
[42] Cusk, *Saving Agnes*, p. 190.
[43] Cusk, *Saving Agnes*, p. 12.

bildungsroman can provide. This anachronistic, quasi-Victorian streak in Agnes' character is signalled by her name, Agnes Day, which sounds like *Agnus Dei*, literally meaning 'lamb of God,' a term used in Christian theology to designate Jesus Christ as both sacrificial offering and saviour. In many ways Agnes is indeed a lamb led to the slaughter, yet rather than saving other people, it is she who requires salvation. The condition she needs saving from is womanliness itself, described in the novel 'as a hideous eruption of deformities accompanied by a simultaneous rejection from the society of her brother Tom and his friends'.[44] As a post-feminist text, expected to showcase female self-confidence and autonomy, Cusk's novel is profoundly disappointing as it concludes not on a moment of emancipatory self-realization but the romantic serendipity of Agnes meeting Stephen on a double-decker bus stuck in rush-hour traffic. According to Angela McRobbie, what occurred at the end of the twentieth century was 'a dramatic "unfixing" of young women [resulting in] a greater degree of fluidity about what femininity means and how exactly it is anchored in social reality'.[45] In *Saving Agnes* it seems to be exactly this 'unfixing' that lies at the root of Agnes' unhappiness and disorientation. As it turns out, the saving of Agnes requires rendering her a passive recipient of traditional female *Bildung*, offering romance and coupledom to deliver her from too much promiscuous choice and autonomy.

The novels of Ian McEwan present us with successful middle-class professionals who appear to display none of the dysfunctionality flaunted by Amis' and Burchill's characters, nor any of the compulsive self-dissection that cripples the lives of Kelman's and Galloway's protagonists. If ever their younger selves found themselves as lost as Agnes, they clearly managed somehow to save themselves, presumably by committing to permanent marital relationships similar to that augured by Agnes' encounter with Stephen at the end of Cusk's

[44] Cusk, *Saving Agnes*, p. 44.
[45] Angela McRobbie, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 157.

novel. Albeit solitary most of the time, McEwan's central male protagonists are never single. They are men defined and bolstered by their marital status. While in *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981) the assumed complementarity of the sexes is still seriously threatened by their polarity, resulting in mutual Gothic destruction rather than domestic bliss, the marriages of Stephen and Julie in *The Child in Time* (1987), Jeremy and Jenny in *Black Dogs* (1992), and Joe and Clarissa in *Enduring Love* (1997) all incorporate a perfect balance of masculinity and femininity, depicting each sex as neatly demarcated and self-contained while invariably featuring the female in the position of anchor and 'home.' Even when riven and estranged to breaking point, McEwan's couples always eventually reconcile, often in grand denouements choreographed by the male hero.

McEwan's couples are conspicuously atypical of the expedient transience favoured by the neoliberal age which, according to Harvey, celebrates 'ephemerality and the short-term contract – marriage, for example, is understood as a short-term contractual arrangement rather than as a sacred and unbreakable bond'.[46] McEwan's men and women do not balk at kin creation and overall display very little affinity with the torn and dithering individuals described by Zygmunt Bauman in *Liquid Love* who are 'yearning for the security of togetherness and for a helping hand to count on in a moment of trouble, and so desperate to "relate"; yet wary of the state of "being related" and particularly of being related "for good"'.[47] As in *Saving Agnes*, in McEwan's novels coupledom 'saves' the individual, and it does so enduringly. Private and inward-looking, McEwan's couples embody fortresses built to ward off and withstand contemporary society rather than advance the latter's progress and evolution. Their unions serve the purpose of establishing order and certainty in the form of an intimate *égoïsme à deux*, designed to boost the freedom and autonomy of the traditional self

[46] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 166.
[47] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), p. viii.

by safeguarding against the laissez-faire anarchy of increasing neoliberalization. McEwan's heroes know better than to cut loose from traditional coupledom whereas, by contrast, the gay men in Alan Hollinghurst's fiction appear to have much more in common with Harvey's and Bauman's liquid lovers. Significantly, however, the transience of the couple as a mere vehicle to deliver mutual self-gratification, and of love as little more than a passing sexual infatuation, does not strike Hollinghurst's characters as an affliction, let alone a cultural malaise; on the contrary, the dissolution of society is seen as wholly conducive to queer liberation and self-actualization. In Hollinghurst's novels the limelight is invariably occupied by compelling Susan Street impersonators rather than the gay male counterparts of plain Agnes Day. Only in post-AIDS hindsight, as the queer maxim of everybody for himself begins to disclose its true neoliberal countenance, does monogamous commitment assume more positive connotations. Still, in all his works, Hollinghurst can never entirely stop himself worshipping promiscuity's irresistibly virile allure.

A much more detailed analysis than this chapter can deliver is required to understand the couple as heteronormativity's savviest manoeuvre yet to reconcile the neoliberal and neoconservative agendas and turn them to the advantage of the self-as-entrepreneur. For the purposes of this chapter suffice it to say that there is at least one late twentieth-century novel that resists the *zeitgeist* by setting out to rehabilitate individual *Bildung* as a means of advancing communal solidarity and portray the couple as society's core, not just its founding stone, but its actual 'live' key. Neil Bartlett's *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall* (1990) is a gay coming-of-age novel that is inclined towards marriage from the outset and indeed takes great pleasure in taking us through the catalogue of pre-matrimonial rituals of courtship and engagement. Yet in the end the novel by far transcends marriage's traditional promise of self-fulfilment. Showing couple bonds and community membership as integral to the process of

maturation, marriage does not settle the individual's self-completion, but only sets it on its way. Despite its intimate tone and distinct subcultural outlook, Bartlett's novel never turns inward; instead, it makes the most of its own radically molecular disposition by sending its two protagonists out into the world to build bridges and establish connections. The gay couple exemplify their community; they are 'our mascots, our perfect pair, the sign of all our hopes'.[48] The moment when the lovers decide to become 'a regular couple, just like an ordinary couple'[49] is also the moment when their subversive potential peaks. Boy and Older's engagement quite literally unleashes a storm as society no longer has any other option than to yield to transformation. While it is highly unlikely that Amis and Bartlett ever shared the same vision, *Money*'s John Self certainly has a point when he ruminates that 'as a Faggot, I might be a roaring success … Well, it's been your century, guys, I'll give you that'.[50] Rather than prioritizing the common good over individual self-fulfilment (or vice versa) Bartlett's novel never disaggregates the two in the first place. The novel launches a fiercely counterintuitive attack on neoliberalism's atomization of the individual. Determined to show that there is indeed such-a-thing-as-society, Bartlett's married couple turns out in the end to be far more radical than Hollinghurst's dissenting queers, as well as far more securely anchored in society than McEwan's heterosexual paragons of self-adjustment.

Our investigation of the novel under neoliberalism concludes with a very brief look at Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet* (1982) as an example of the late twentieth-century British family saga. Representative of a new type of postcolonial novel that first began to emerge in the early 1980s, *Sour Sweet* is primarily focused on the diasporic experience of a family of first-generation Chinese immigrants. The novel belongs to a multicultural canon of Anglo-ethnic writing produced by British-identified authors of mixed heritage, some of whom – like Mo,

[48] Neil Bartlett, *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall* (London: Penguin, 1992 [1990]), p. 127.
[49] Bartlett, *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall*, p. 184.
[50] Amis, *Money*, p. 202.

who was born in Hong Kong – came to the United Kingdom as young children. What justifies our perhaps slightly eclectic choice is the unique attention Mo's novel pays to family dynamics, which turns out to be of critical importance to the novel's conceptual structure and socio-cultural critique. *Sour Sweet* tells the story of a married couple, Lily (as *mater familias*) and her husband Chen, their young son, Man Kee, and Lily's spinster sister, Mui. Of particular interest is Lily's acutely xenophobic impassivity, which renders her impervious to integration while causing her family to petrify into an alien, perfectly self-encapsulated unit whose self-professed Chineseness is growing increasingly spurious as no actual socializing with other Chinese ever takes place. The only contact there is consists of Chen's shady and ultimately fatal entanglement with the Triads, a mafia-like secret society operating in China Town, whose ethos Elaine Ho has poignantly described as 'nothing less than family values running amok'.[51] The Chens form a satellite cut loose from its centre, while around them society, both as a reality and as a concept, atrophies into an outer-space vacuum from which other people – as customers, or anonymous representatives of the state – momentarily come and go. We find the Chens' experience of community and citizenship reduced to the routine of purely economic exchange that takes place in their Chinese takeaway, which is popular and doing well, yet situated on the very margins of society within an area of urban wasteland.

In Mo's novel individual identity is subsumed under kinship categories. The characters routinely refer to themselves and each other by their familial titles of 'Elder Sister,' 'Younger Sister' and 'Husband,' while at the beginning of the novel Man Kee's education is imagined less in terms of 'the development of an individual than the settling in of a key brick in a planned and highly structured edifice'.[52] Only very gradually does the family begin to unclench and lose some of its rigidity, as isolation, fear of assimilation and a loss of identity

[51] Elaine Yee Lin Ho, *Timothy Mo* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 65.
[52] Timothy Mo, *Sour Sweet* (London: Vintage, 1992 [1982]), p. 7.

give way to a more open and organic response to society at large. Mui's apparent docility in particular is increasingly channelled into a rogue multicultural agency, which culminates in the birth of an illegitimate mixed-race child, whose father's identity is never revealed. Meanwhile, Man Kee's destination is becoming similarly indeterminate and unpredictable. Unlike his parents, he is said to be 'getting a fresh start. He had no history, no heritage to live up to, no goal to fulfil, no ancient burden to carry'.[53] Still, the family does not exactly gel with society, and Mo continues to picture it as a self-sufficient organism that absorbs rather than incorporates or represents its members while remaining entirely oblivious of its own potential to belong and slot into a larger whole. 'The household (that amoeba), presented with change and challenge, shuddered like jelly on impact with the obstacle,' Mo writes, 'but jelly-like suffered no damage, poured itself around the problem, dissolved what it was able to and absorbed what it could not. And went on its amoeba way'.[54] Notably, all these conflictual tensions between family and society seem to have ceased to signify, or at least surface in a rather different way, in a more recent and much better-known family saga, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000).

In *White Teeth* society at large seems no longer to be at issue. Yet rather than championing the family now as a fully integrated building block of society, Smith's vision causes society to become eclipsed – usurped rather than allegorized – by the family, whose internal tensions are presented to us as the only thing that matters, thus rendering multicultural politics in effect a family affair. The rift between society and the individual – and the couple and the family as extensions of the individual – remains, yet it appears that by the late twentieth century this dissociation had already become a perfectly naturalized component of Britain's social imaginary and structure of feeling. Consequently, any late twentieth-century novel's

[53] Mo, *Sour Sweet*, p. 111.
[54] Mo, *Sour Sweet*, p. 228.

attempt at seriously wanting to problematize society was likely to go unnoticed to the point of wholly disappearing from view. In this light, then, it should not surprise us greatly that the script written by Ian McEwan for the cinematic adaptation of *Sour Sweet*, directed by Mike Newell in 1988, entirely ignores the fraught neoliberal dichotomy of family and society, asserting instead that 'the film's real subject was Lily and Chen, the marriage, their relationship, their adventure in coming to England, the clash of their different personalities'.[55]

[55] Ian McEwan, *Soursweet* (London: Faber, 1988), p. ix.